

A
S E R M O N

PREACHED ON

The 19th of November, at St. Peter's, Cornhill.



529
The Conversion of Sinners the greatest Charity.

BEING THE SUBSTANCE

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The 19th of November, at St. PETER'S,
CORNHILL,

BEFORE A

SOCIETY for Promoting RELIGIOUS
KNOWLEDGE amongst the POOR;

A N D

Published at the Desire of some of the Audience.

By H. VENN, A. M.

Rector of Yelling, and Chaplain to the Earl of Buchan.

L O N D O N,

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MDCCLXXIX.



PSALM cxxix. 136.

*Rivers of waters run from mine eyes, because
they keep not thy law.*

THE tears of a king famous for wisdom and religion, will affect every spectator. But when we know they flow only from love to God and man, what is there on earth so venerable? And such a mourner was *David*, the king of *Israel* and *Judah*, when he uttered these words, worthy to be heard to the end of time, throughout the world.

Then did love of God and his oracles, then did bowels of mercies towards all who despised them, from knowledge of their great misery, fill his heart with grief, which broke forth with weeping and fervent prayer, that they might be

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saved,

saved. *Rivers of waters run from mine eyes, because they keep not thy law.*

And thus the Founders of the Society we meet here to encourage, were affected, and had no rest in their spirit, till they executed a plan to propagate religious knowledge amongst the poor. And, truly affected in the presence of God, from the same precious faith and love, may we all now cheerfully join in the richest act of mercy, one sinner can possibly shew towards another, that is, in seeking to save them who keep not the law of God.

By this description, we are not to understand the countless deviations from the rule of our duty, chargeable upon the most excellent; clearly proving, *that by the works of the law, verily no flesh shall be justified.* Wilful transgressors only are intended; contentious men, who will not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness.

Now a full proof of their utmost misery, will make the supreme excellency of the work before us self-evident.

In their condition then, there is abundant matter to draw tears often, and plentifully, from the eyes of every Christian, who lays it to heart. For they are very miserable in themselves. They are continually doing great evil in the world. Their spirit towards the ever blessed God is horrid. And the consequences of their choice, dreadful beyond all we can conceive.

They who keep not God's law are in themselves very miserable; for they entirely pervert all the faculties which should exalt them above brutes—The *understanding*, capable of receiving treasures of divine knowledge, which make men wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus, *they* put to no higher use than that of serving the body. The *will*, which by stedfast choice of God as their portion, would be the means of transforming them into his own image, is alienated more and more from him, by cleaving to mean and earthly objects. The *memory*, which should faithfully register the counsels and works of God,

and the sum of mercies and deliverances they have received from him, is but a sink for all trash, and lies against the truth, and filthy ideas, which defile them more and more. The *imagination*, of admirable use when sanctified to increase joy in meditating upon the sublime prospects the Bible opens, works in them only to paint in enchanting colours, what is sure at last to sting as an adder; and to create bug-bears, which fill them with prejudices against the service of Christ. The *passions* too, of mighty force to manifest the excellent spirit of regenerate men, only betray their folly and madness, who keep not God's law—for they *love* what He loathes, and *hate* what He delights in; they *fear*, as brutes, the scourge which pains the flesh, not the vile tempers which deform the soul, and make it meet for hell—They *grieve*, not that they have sinned against God, but for private losses, and the disappointment of immoderate desires, with the sorrow of the world, which worketh death—And their *joy* is in serving greedy,
blind

blind appetites, which, often drawing contrary ways, distract them sorely, and often push them on to foul offences, fatal to their character amongst men, and to all future ease of mind. So that to drown reflexion on what they have done, and every thought of what is before them, the rich no less than the poor, amongst those who keep not God's law, often publish to the world, what an insufferable burden they are become to themselves, by sealing their own perdition with an act of self-murder.

O how forlorn, how agitated, how tortured must they be, when driven to chuse strangling rather than life!

Can a *Christian* lay to heart their condition without weeping over them?

He who knows all they feel, assures us, that in every instance, the way of sinners is *hard*, and they *wretched and miserable*; that their minds are like the *troubled sea, when it casteth up mire and dirt*.—There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked: Nay he saith more, he compares *Israel* revolted from him, (which must

must be equally true of every wilful transgressor) to a body covered from the crown of the head to the sole of the feet, with wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores.—So that were a wilful transgressor of God's law to suffer *all alone*, he would be an object of sorrowful pity, and every Christian must feel an active desire to recover him from his sinful condition.

How much more, when you lay to heart, *the great evil, all who keep not God's law are continually doing*. I confine myself on the present occasion to the poor, yet the richer men are, the greater curse they prove by their wider sphere of influence. As to the ungodly poor, without restraint from education, and utterly careless, even to save appearances, their evil tempers have their full sway. Accordingly they harraßs one another when joined in nearest ties, and under solemn vows to dwell together in love. Instead of love, discord and contention soon, alas! break out, and grow up to loud brawls and shameless quarrels—Provoking and provoked, fury at length rages, and the
very

very hand plighted before God to protect, is the hand which often cruelly destroys a wife of youth, when most unfit to die! Or when husbands and wives kept from this bloody excess of wrath, live together, how miserable must their offspring be! You who have children of your own, surely cannot consider their case without tears; no care, no counsel, no good example, or tender love do they experience at home, but are orphans in the most affecting sense, with their parents at their side; for they hear little from them but harsh threats and fierce upbraidings, and so often receive stripes and blows without a cause, that they soon grow callous to correction, and indeed insensible whether they do well or ill.

In a thousand poor families you may also see the mother with dejected look, bearing the strongest pain, whilst her little ones are pining as herself with scarcity of food, and shiver for the want of raiment. Bitter distress in itself! Yet is it rendered tenfold heavier to bear,
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by the man who brings all they feel upon them. Would you believe it possible—The husband and the father is the man, who will consume upon his vile lusts, dearer to him than his own flesh, what would comfortably feed and clothe his family.

But why do I name wrathful upbraidings and cruel blows; a wife and children pining for scarcity of food, or shivering for want of raiment! These are evils of little size compared with greater injuries done by those who keep not God's law, to all about them, unless almighty grace prevent; for a horrid contagion is in the house of the wicked, so catching, that God commands us to go out of their presence, lest evil communications should corrupt even good manners.

Judge then, what deep and fatal impressions must be made on *their* children, by one continual scene of profane living, oaths, lies, pilfering, drunkenness, obscenity, and storms of passion: the certain effect, unless almighty grace prevent

present, is lamentable and notorious—
 Their offspring, almost from their cradle,
 do iniquity, speak lies, echo back the
 bitter curses they have heard, grow up
 profane, stubborn, malicious, addicted
 to all wickedness, the very image of their
 parents.—Hence with population, the
 dominion of sin and Satan is enlarged,
 till civil society groans under the burden
 of its own ungodly members, less honest
 and kind to their kindred and friends,
 than savages are found. The evil spreads
 till the mass of common people (a few
 excepted) are without sense of good and
 evil, always laying in wait to over-reach
 their employers. Eye-servants, they are
 eaten up with sloth; whom no good
 treatment can win to be faithful, no
 wages can satisfy, no work can please.
 A great part of them, if they must work
 for their bread, are impatient to leave
 it, that they may fly to the haunts of
 lewd drunkards and gamesters, from
 whence they soon turn out daring of-
 fenders, who live by violence and plun-
 der,

der, till laden with guilt and infamy, they be taken and destroyed.

So great is the personal misery, the trouble and wickedness in families, such the fatal infection to many souls, and profligacy of manners calamitous to society, which a multitude of wilful transgressors of God's law bring upon themselves and mankind. And on account of their worthless and noxious life, the children of disobedience are called in scripture, thorns and briers, dross, thistles and chaff—At their conversion by the knowledge of Christ, wolves, leopards, lions, and bears are said to be changed into gentle and profitable animals. What these expressive figures teach, the inspired apostle literally affirms; for speaking of himself and the churches of Christ, before they had received the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost through faith in Jesus Christ, in whom they were justified—speaking of their and his own wicked states, before this change had taken place—*We ourselves, says he, were sometimes foolish, dis-*

disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another. Who can estimate the perpetual, the extensive evils such tempers and such examples must produce! And whilst by both, all who keep not God's law, are great enemies to their fellow-creatures, the injury they do reaches much higher than to guilty mankind: it reaches to one who claims by indefeasible right the supreme love of all rational creatures, and is more dear to Christians than their life, I mean the ever blessed God. Towards HIM the spirit of wilful transgressors is sacrilegious; for *him* they rob of the obedience of their lives, the affections of their heart, and the proper use of all their noble faculties; *him* they despise, whilst they rob. Big with satanic pride, though worms, *self* is still all in their own eyes—The revelation of the Lord God omnipotent, published in his own majestic style, is to them *nothing*; for they are charged with setting at nought all his reproofs, and obstinately refusing

to hear him, when he calls upon them to return, and even stretches out his hand to warn them of their destruction—*Lim* they requite for the gift of life, breath, and all things with what his soul abhors—*Him* they requite thus with an ingratitude which brutes, in our account stupid to a proverb, never fail to upbraid: for these brutes willingly give all their strength to husbandmen who feed them, as sensible of their debt. *The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib, but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider.* Poor dumb animals, kept and fed for the profit they produce to their masters who need their service, act aright without the understanding of men—But wilful transgressors of God's law, rational, bred up in the glorious land on which the sun of righteousness shines, commanded to obey only for their own good always—These men, to whom so much is given, and from whom so much is justly required, make a return,—what Christian can think of it without tears and horror? they make the
 very

very return that *Abfalom* did to *David* for sparing his forfeited life—They seek to lay their heavenly Father's honour in the dust, to overturn his throne, and even destroy his name from off the face of the earth. A conduct incredible, did not fact, did not the mouth of the Lord declare it. This charge is his, and introduced with a most solemn appeal to angels and men, deeply to attend—*Hear, O heaven, and give ear, O earth, I have nourished and bred up children, and they have rebelled against me.*—He again affirms, and will have it recorded, that there dwells in the heart of the disobedient, a steadfast hate and impious rage against him. *Write it in a book, that it may be for the generations to come, that this is a rebellious people, that will not hear the law of the Lord; that say to the seers, see not; and to the prophets, prophecy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophecy deceit. Get you out of the way; turn aside out of the path; cause the holy one of Israel to cease from before us,* *Isai. xxx.*

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—In other words, Destroy his name from off the face of the earth. Have done, or we will make you, with your representations of the character he draws of himself. We will not bear the mention of any God, who is not altogether such a one as ourselves; hating iniquity no more than we, nor threatening us with the consequences of our conduct.

You must confess a more horrid spirit than this towards the ever blessed God, cannot be conceived, yet it receives considerable aggravations from alarming proofs in what is past, and in what is before us. *Both* publish how the Lord our God hates and punishes sin. Through all Christian countries it is known, that he hath come out of his place to sweep the largest *cities*, the pride of ages, with the besom of destruction; and to put out the name of many *nations* for their iniquity—It is known through all Christian countries, that his once peculiar people have been doomed for near two thousand years to infamy, to unexampled sufferings, to spiritual darkness, for re-
jecting

jecting Christ—It is known that at one single stroke the whole world of the ungodly (more populous than the present) was destroyed—And it is known by a report louder than all these, that God hath held forth his *own* Son to be a propitiation for sin, through faith in his blood, that in this proof sin might appear exceeding sinful—With these past facts perpetual appeals are made to our very senses, of a *continual* punishment of sin—Of this nature, are the cries of women, when their pangs come upon them: and the most heart-piercing sound, my ears ever heard, that of infants, who have not sinned after the similitude of *Adam's* transgression, shrieking for very pain under which they languish till they die.—Of this nature, is the toil and trouble which fill the world beyond utterance. The armies of fierce diseases, from which no mortal is one hour secure, and the groans of convulsed and expiring relations, friends, or neighbours—Thus with rebukes doth it seem good in thy eyes, O Holy Father, to chasten men for sin, and
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lay upon them these heavy, but righteous penalties.

To be a wilful transgressor, therefore, of God's law in these circumstances, is wickedness like theirs, who plunder houses at the instant the earth shakes terribly under their feet, and swallows up thousands in the twinkling of an eye.—

And now what *must* be the end of all these unjust, unthankful men, enemies to their fellow-creatures and to their Maker, to the end of life? Shall they escape? Can they be admitted into heaven? Would not this be to admit proud and turbulent, sensual and devilish spirits, after all the evil they have done *here*, to do still more in a world of absolute order, purity, and love?—Or shall their execrable principles and practices be had no more in remembrance, by blotting them out of the creation of God?—O how strongly have I been inclined to wish it were possible this might be their end! What guilt have I brought upon my poor soul, by quarreling with the holy will of God, as if I was more

merciful than he!—For my wish was the effect of blind pity, feeling for self-destroyed sinners, without taking any delight in the manifestation of the veracity, justice, and holiness of God, or the good of his upright and redeemed creatures; all which absolutely require that the wicked should be turned into hell, and all the people that forget God—Or it could never have been so appointed—*Then*, when this irreparable ruin, the consequence of their own hideous choice, is come upon them, so that they can be deceived no longer—*Then*, when that abhorrence, in which the whole company of Heaven, with the Lord and Judge of all, have held their temper and conduct, shall bring upon them shame and everlasting contempt—When they shall feel a punishment adequate to their offences, of which God only can make the estimate—a punishment designed to prove for ever the evil there is in sin—Then, from the loss they have brought upon themselves, saith our God, they will *weep*—from anguish of spirit they will *wail*, and knowing there is no

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end

end of their punishment; they will gnash their teeth in hell, where the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. The whole of this misery, is not the conceit of melancholy or of superstitious minds, but a reality inevitable to the servants of sin, as death itself, which opens the door to let them into it all, according to the positive declaration of the Judge of the whole earth.—

The conclusion, therefore, must be self-evident, that the richest act of mercy, the most benevolent can possibly shew to their fellow-creatures, is using the best means to save any of them, who by sin and wickedness stand exposed to these endless pains. After this scriptural view of their condition, with joy I now turn your attention to those excellent Christians, who have a heart to melt over these perishing sinners, I beseech you to aid them, who are united in a Society, established upon the tenderest love for their souls. This society was began by six eminent Christians in 1750, who asked the help of their particular friends, that they might bring the knowledge of
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the 'gospel amongst the poor, who kept not God's law—They understood well that such are ignorant and blind, not knowing what spirit they are of, the measure of their guilt, and as little the power and grace by which, if ever, they must be redeemed from all iniquity—Our society, therefore, distributes amongst the poor, as our fund will allow, the Holy Bible, given by inspiration of God, and profitable for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness—But as this inestimable book is very dark to those who live in sin, and they indisposed to ask of God its meaning, a great number of other books is freely distributed. Books chosen with admirable judgment, which speak to every man's conscience in the sight of God, with a voice of thunder, laying open to the bottom, without fear of offence, the misery, vileness, and certain damnation of all who to the last despise God, and his Christ, and their own souls.—After this full and faithful warning, they plead, they expostulate, and with fervent prayers intreat God to make effectual impression

upon the reader, that his soul may be saved; manifesting a degree of love very rarely to be found in any religious writings—This I may affirm with great truth of the Rev. Mr. *Richard Baxter's* Call to the Unconverted, and the Rev. Mr. *Joseph Alleine's* Alarm—We may compare these two small volumes to the relics of *Elisba*—who was not only highly honoured during his ministry, but years after his decease, when a dead man touched the great prophet's bones, he was instantly made, by divine virtue proceeding from them, to live again—But greater glory from God rests upon the relics, I mean the unanswerable pleadings for his cause, which these two servants of Christ have left behind them—Not a body, but a soul, not one, but many, touched by the truth they have written, have instantly yielded themselves to God, as alive from the dead.

This excellent Society, in the space of twenty-eight years has encreased from six to above eight hundred subscribers—And surely was it more known, this little number would very soon be multiplied exceedingly,

ingly: because by such societies the efficacy of Christian benevolence is made of great extent, and only by such is complete. For when we have relieved widows and orphans, the maimed, the sick, the hungry, and naked—yet our best relief of their corporeal wants, if nothing be done for their souls, how very short is it!—Still are they wretched and miserable, and poor and blind, and naked in the eye of God—Still wicked because unbelieving; still in their tempers vexatious, in their example pernicious, and hastening to eternal ruin.—And however terrible it be to suffer want and hunger, sickness, pain or broken limbs, there is nothing in them which God hates, which harraßes and destroys others, or necessarily proves hurtful—So far from it, these evils have been of sovereign virtue to millions, who, under such scourges, have first come to themselves, and then returned to God, rich gainers from their deepest need.—

But in men who keep not God's law, the objects of our charity, all is evil, infectious, loathsome, and destructive—Whenever, therefore, by our distribution
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of the Holy Bible, or of books written by faithful ministers of Christ, grace takes effect, in answer to many cordial prayers for a divine blessing upon them, how immense the value of a deliverance from all wickedness, misery, and ruin! —The recovered souls receive a *complete* salvation, from madness to reason, from folly to wisdom, from Satan to God—The harsh and sour, the idle, dishonest, and malicious; the base and lewd, filled with Godly sorrow for what they have been, from henceforth comfort and instruct their families, and adorn the lowest station of life with all Christian graces—though lively faith and hope, even in poverty, possess all things—Heaven above and the church below, behold the change from all that is evil to all that is excellent—*They go out* (of their thralldom to sin and Satan) *with joy, and are led forth with peace, the mountains and the hills break forth before them into singing, and all the trees of the field clap their hands. For instead of the thorn comes up the fir tree, and instead of the briar comes up the myrtle tree, to be to the Lord for a*
6 name,

name, for an everlasting sign, which shall not be cut off. What Christian can refrain from tears of joy at such a sight, or withhold his liberality to encourage, or his prayers for a blessing to come down upon every society, which has such immense good for its object? Besides, my Christian friends, we must have joy in strengthening the hands of our Society to do good, because we have been, every one of us, the very objects we seek to deliver from their misery. Our prayers testify that we have smarted as they under guilt, and trembled in fear of the judgments of God, to whom we were once enemies, as they are still, and children of wrath—Under a senseless form of religion, seeing we perceived not, and hearing we understood not—Restless in our minds, and subject to passions, which often made us as tearing briars and pricking thorns to those about us—But now we have obtained mercy, we experience the difference between the service of Christ and the bondage of sin. So that all the misery we have known to be so bitter, and all the peace and consolation which we
find

find in Christ, the very balm of life to our souls, is a perpetual call upon our hearts, sounding to this effect, “Thou
 “oughtest to have compassion on the un-
 “converted, even as thy God hath had
 “pity on thee—Irresistible argument to
 “a gracious heart for using every effort
 “to rescue sinners from their spiritual
 “misery.”—

I must add another very alarming call indeed, I mean the spread, beyond all example, of blasphemous writings both to make scoffers, and gratify to the utmost their lewd abandoned hearts, when they are become such—Every day there are sold in six-penny numbers, in all towns of Great Britain, the works of *Voltaire*, that our countrymen turning their backs upon the great salvation of God, may become *his* disciples—“may believe immortal man is but a mite, and our world
 “the cheese on which he lives, having
 “nothing to fear of just retribution from
 “God, let him do as he please.”—This despicable, this shocking comparison I have read myself in this wise philosopher’s writings.—For God’s sake, therefore, and
 for

for the sake of that precious redemption, by which so many of our countrymen, our ancestors, probably our own dear parents have lived in comfort and honour, died in the peace of God, and are entered into his rest—for the sake of souls, that they may not be without a warning voice against seducing spirits, all active, and now multiplied to a portentous degree; let us give what aid we can, and let our names have place in the list of those who lift up, by the Spirit of God, a standard against the overflowings of ungodliness, which at this hour make the best and wisest amongst us afraid for the consequences.—One thing more I would bring to your remembrance, my Christian friends. Sorrowful pity for perishing sinners, and joy in seeking their salvation, is the most striking excellency in the brightest characters; and unquestionably proves, that we, who act under the influence of this loving spirit, are born of God—This *Abraham* felt when he interceded with repeated supplications for the sinners of *Sodom*—This made *Moses*

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stand in the gap, and prostrate himself, and fast forty nights and forty days, as at the first, that rebellious *Israel* might not be consumed.—This loving spirit made *Samuel* weep and mourn for the rejected *Saul*—brought rivers of tears from the eyes of *David*, *Jeremiah*, and *Daniel*—This made the chief of all the apostles, though absolutely assured of an eternal and exceeding weight of glory, have continual sorrow and heaviness of heart for his blaspheming brethren the Jews—And this made the *WORD*, who was with God, and who was God, stop in the midst of the single triumph, which he received on earth.—

The hosannas so infinitely due to him from the vast multitude who went before him, and who followed after, are of a sudden checked. Silence, to the astonishment of all, takes place. Do you ask the reason? It is not the agony he knew awaited him in *Gethsemane*—It is not the excruciating desertion and horror of great darkness he was so soon to feel on the cross—It is only the misery of those who
would

would not hear the law from his mouth—*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, said he, weeping over its inhabitants, how often would I have gathered thee under my wings, as a hen gathereth her chickens, and ye would not—Behold your house is left unto you desolate.—* Thus it became him, to express his feelings, even for those whom eternal justice could no more suffer to dwell in their place or city, who were about to fill up the measure of their iniquities, by shedding his most precious blood on the cross.—

What then has there been on earth, most excellent or divine, to whom you may not, my Christian friends, be likened, when ye are mourners over the servants of sin, and, with supplication for success, give your liberality to be most faithfully and successfully applied to save some of them—What prophet, apostle, angel, or the God of angels, but feels affected on this subject?—And what more sure and infallible proof and witness can you have in yourselves, that you shall go to Heaven when you

die, than being already of one heart and of one mind with the angels in the presence of God, who *have more joy over one sinner that repenteth*, than over ninety and nine just persons, who, being already converted, need no repentance.

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R U L E S

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1 PETER II. 4, 5.

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